



EXCAVATIONS

(mining my and others' words)

Tom Corrado

Writers, like all of us, carry around a lot of quirky, trivial, nostalgic, random, or otherwise hard-to-classify stuff in their heads, and who are we as readers to deny them this reserve fund, even if we can ever only partially share their frames of reference?

- James Gibbons in his review of John Ashbery's *Breezeway*

The key to writing is learning to differentiate private interest from public entertainment.

- David Foster Wallace

Spooooo!

- Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*

And I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

- Job's servant as appropriated by Herman Melville

Acting! Thank you!

- Master Thespian

Opening scene:

Twilight

Two people talking

Person 1: Where'd this come from?

Person 2: Krapp!

Person 1: Huh?

Person 2: Y'know, Krapp, from Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape*.

Person 1: Aha!

Person 2: Yeah, I was thinking about Krapp, and how he listened to tapes he'd recorded over the years. Mining his life. Excavating his life. And I thought, *Yeah this is good*. So instead of 20 tapes or 20 questions, I've got 20 excavations. Words that over the years became for me earworms . . . mental Post-its . . . and more!

Person 1: Spooooo!

Excavation #1

He'd lost his magic. The impulse was spent. He'd never failed in the theater, everything he had done had been strong and successful, and then the terrible thing happened: he couldn't act. Going onstage became agony. Instead of the certainty that he was going to be wonderful, he knew he was going to fail. It happened three times in a row, and by the last time nobody was interested, nobody came. He couldn't get over to the audience. His talent was dead. . . . He was conscious of every moment he was on the stage in the worst possible way. In the past when he was acting he wasn't thinking about anything. What he did well he did out of instinct. Now he was thinking about everything, and everything spontaneous and vital was killed - he tried to control it with thinking and instead he destroyed it. . . . He dreaded every performance, and dreaded it all day long. He spent the entire day thinking thoughts he'd never thought before a performance in his life: I won't make it, I won't be able to do it, I'm playing the wrong roles, I'm overreaching, I'm faking, I have no idea even of how to do the first line.

- Philip Roth, *The Humbling* (2009)

A not-so-late evening . . .

A not-so-late evening . . . at the Pine Hollow Arboretum

Opening scene of the 2014 film adaptation of Philip Roth's novella *The Humbling*. Like Krapp Al Pacino as Simon Axler is a wearish old man

A wearish old man . . . at the Pine Hollow Arboretum:

All the world's a stage

All the world's a stage

All the world's a stage

How's that? Better?

All the world's a stage

All the world's a cage

*All the world's a page
All the world's a rage*

*And all the men and women merely players
And all the men and women . . . merely players*

*They have their exits and their entrances
Their exits and their entrances
Their entrances and their exits*

*their lines
and their enjambments
their selfies
their PINs
their horns-a plenty
their leisure suits
their iPhones
their Coup de Villes
their handicaps
their ABCs
their SUVs
their partridges in a pear tree
their early bird specials*

And one woman . . . and one man . . . in their time . . . play many parts

Excavation #2

Spanish Class
Circa 1960

Brother Maestro at the controls in language lab:

*Silencio!
La familia de Cecilia
Buenas noche Dona Mercedes donde es Julio
Sí que está en la cocina
Julio, aquí esta Pablo
Pablo, estoy aquí . . . en mi cuarto . . .
Again
Estoy aquí . . . I am here
en mi cuarto . . . in my room
Again
Estoy aquí . . . I am here
en mi cuarto . . . in my room*

Meanwhile . . . The Beach Boys

*There's a place where I can go and tell my secrets to
In my room
In my room
en mi cuarto*

*Again
Estoy aquí . . . I am here
en mi cuarto . . . in my room*

Excavation #3

Hal Holbrook as Mark Twain
Circa 1950s

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
Chapter 16 (Huck's turning point)*

Huck gets in a canoe leaving Jim the runaway slave on a raft offshore from Cairo, Illinois (pronounced care-o). Huck is planning to turn Jim in.

Huck:

Well, I just felt sick. But I says I got to do it - I can't get out of it. Right then along comes a skiff with two men in it with guns, and they stopped, and I stopped. One of them says:

*What's that yonder?
A piece of raft, sir.
You belong on it?
Yes, sir.*

*Any men on it?
Only one, sir.*

*Well, there's five niggers run off tonight up yonder, above the head of the bend.
Is your man white . . . or black?*

I didn't answer up prompt. I tried to but the words wouldn't come. I tried for a second or two to brace up and come out it, but I weren't man enough - hadn't the spunk of a rabbit. I see I was weakening; so I just give up trying, and up and says: He's white.

Excavation #4

Today or Yesterday

Today or yesterday
I took the 6:55 train to New York City.
I bought the ticket online
packed my backpack with a bottle of water
a new book of essays on Anne Carson
a book of poems titled
I Want to Make You Safe by Amy King
who teaches poetry
at Nassau Community College
and had John Ashbery
for a teacher at Brooklyn College
my Kindle Paperwhite
a yellow pad
a 1.3 mm mechanical pencil (I like fat leads)
and a provolone and tomato sandwich
on sourdough.
I got there early.

The train was already there.
I took a seat on the river side of the car
facing forward toward New York City.
I put my backpack on the seat next to me
to discourage anyone from sitting there.
(It worked!)

I looked out the window at Albany
as the train left the station.
I was heading to the Guggenheim
to see the posthumous exhibit
of On Kawara whose artistic life
according to the April 2015 issue
of *Art in America*
was anchored
by the simple labor of painting
the dates of the days he lived through.
He began in 1966 when he was 33
and continued until his death in 2014 -
a painting a day for almost 50 years.
Can you imagine?
A painting a day for almost 50 years.
Somewhere in the middle of an essay
on Anne Carson I fell asleep
and woke as we pulled into Penn Station.
It was a beautiful day.
I decided to walk the three-and-a-half miles
up Madison Avenue to the Guggenheim.

Excavation #5

Leaving Them Ho-Humming

OK, well, maybe not, but I still think it's a good idea. One that could fly. How could it not, given the enticement? It's not every day that you get a break like that. And just think, in no time, you'll have that look which many find comforting as well as encompassing. I know I could have shopped around but, really, to what end? Even Cicero's third oration against Catiline drooped, leaving the crowd ho-humming. Don't play dumb. You know exactly what I'm talking about. The taxing our endurance bit. Over the top? Yeah, so? And as for quantum computing? Listen, you take this cab, and I'll take that one, and we'll count down the difference, then apply the algorithm. Are you in or out? Or in and out? Not unlike Schrödinger's kitty, yes? You'll see. You keep telling me All Gaul is divided into three parts. OK, everything's connected. Entangled. I'll pinch that. You're not the only one with a Many Worlds bumper sticker, you know. Forget the downtime. Insignificant. Tell me, Does he ever leave the house? Does he ever come out? Have you ever seen him except on Skype? I'm not talking Lovecraft, here. Go ahead, ping it.

Excavation #6

In the 1931 classic, Dracula, Bela Lugosi as Count Dracula descends the stairs to greet his realtor, Renfield.

Wolves howl.
Count Dracula:

*Listen to them
Children of the Night
What music they make*

Footnote:

Lugosi's eerie speech pattern as Dracula has been attributed to the fact that he did not speak English, and therefore had to learn and speak his lines phonetically. Though true of his early stage roles, this was not the case in Dracula.

Excavation #7

Sunday May 28th, 1978

I walk to the corner store and buy the New York Times. Back home, paging through, I find a brief article titled *Ozymandias* by Guy Davenport, a professor at the University of Kentucky. This wonderful tidbit is about a banker named Horace Smith who one dreary wintry Saturday afternoon in November visited his friend in the village of Marlow. His friend was Percy Shelley.

Davenport:

Shelley was a mere boy to judge from his snub nose, spindly six feet, and wild hair which he ducks in a pail of water from time to time for as he says the freshness of it. His wife, Mary, a wild-eyed young redhead, reads Tacitus for hours. Her novel, Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus, is at the printer's. The three talk history. Specifically, the pharaohs, and the grandest pharaoh of them all, Rameses II, who had a 60-foot statue of himself erected at Thebes inscribed with his name User-ma-Ra which the Greek historian Hekataios made a hash of, changing it to Ozymandias. The full inscription read King of Kings User-ma-Ra am I. If any want to know how great I am and where I lie, let them outdo my deeds if they can. Smith and Shelley decide to have some fun and write sonnets about the toppled monument which is all that remains of Rameses II's greatness. Smith titles his On a Stupendous Leg of Granite, Discovered Standing by Itself in the Deserts of Egypt, with the Inscription Inserted Below. Shelley calls his Ozymandias. In 10 minutes flat, he composed one of the greatest poems of all time. Davenport suggests that genius may be knowing how to title a poem.

Ozymandias

I met a traveler from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half-sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things.
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed;

And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Excavation #8

On Frankenstein's Birthday

for Mary Shelley
The powerful engine reanimates the commonplace
and transports you to Doug Adams's Galaxy
where you shop for groceries and tend the fire.
A little red helps wipe out the nightmare of cubes.
You'd think solutions would drop from the sky
but instead squirrels on drifts ignite messages
from the Restaurant at the End of the Universe.
You recall taking off in secret,
traveling incognito around the countryside,
not unlike Torquato Tasso,
whose alleged schizophrenia rescued him
from a life without love.
Did Percy too stir with an uneasy, half vital motion
when you were out at all hours
with soft brush, dark crayon, and rice paper?
Were the rubbings a hit in the cabin on Lake Geneva?

Excavation #9

Swimming in Happenstance

I read instruction manuals in my spare time
and have on occasion qualified for the express line.
There's a lot to be said
as was the case with our Coppertoned ancestors
who if truth be told
(and why shouldn't it?)
were lured into blind alleys
more often than not.
It's more important in my opinion
in the long run at least
to swim in happenstance.

Excavation #10

ars poetica (with a small p)

A poem should not mean / But be.
- Archibald Macleish
Outside, the snowflakes dance a minuet.

Wait a minute.
Do I need outside?
Isn't it implicit?
Outside, the snowflakes.
Inside, a minuet.
The snowflakes minuet.
No! No! Too telegraphic!
Try this.
The waves lap the shoreline.
The shoreline?
How about the shore?
The cat lapping the milk.
A minuet of cats.
And the paperboy?
He too could be pelted with snow.
On the beach?
Yes, on the beach.
In the middle of winter?
Why not?
What about the middle of summer?
What about it?
An evening of minuets.
Outside?
Yes.
Under the stars?
Of course.
The empty parking lot filling with snow.
Tracks.
In the snow?
From the dancers?
Dancing a minuet?
Yes.
Outside?
Yes, outside.
Under the stars?
Maybe.
Implied?
Possibly.
Possibly?
Possibly.
The newspaper is snow-soggy.
I'll speak to the paperboy tomorrow.
Outside?
Wherever.
Whatever.
In the middle of a minuet, if need be.
A paperboy dancing the minuet?
Why not?
As one of the snowflakes?
Yes, as one of the snowflakes.
Wouldn't his legs get cold?
Perhaps.

Are they made of paper?
Of course not.
They're made of snow.
He's one of the dancers.
Of the minuet?
Of the minuet.
The dancers have spent weeks rehearsing.
The minuet?
Yes, the minuet.
And now it's snowing?
Yes, and they're dancing.

Excavation #11

Alberto Giacometti, yes?

Openings

The impastos and gouaches in the small gallery
on the third floor, the long limbed bronzes
crowding the poorly lit hallways, the after-hour
departures rehung as an homage to the lives
of the long coats and wide brims that filled
the spaces between the shows and now daily wait
for the commuter train and the safety of the suburbs
are not unlike the visitors who drift through,
stopping occasionally for a closer look
at the work of the brush or painting knife,
the blending of color, the play of light and dark,
scribbling their lives, page after page,
revision upon revision, against the collage
of empty limbs in the courtyard moving to the rhythm
of the wind amid the color fields of seasons
with their unmet promises, their table settings,
their half-filled water glasses.

Excavation #12

Mark Strand's Perfect Poem

Mark Strand died on November 29, 2014. He was 80.

I liked Mark Strand. Why? I liked the fact that he, like John Ashbery, wanted to be a painter. I liked that he was a collagist, with a book of his artwork published in 2013. I liked that at 77, he took a chance, revamped his life, found love, retired from Columbia University, published a new collection of poetry, *Almost Invisible*, began yet another hiatus from writing poetry, and left New York for Madrid. And, of course, I liked the way he worked his words. So there you have it! I liked the man and his poetry! He could be a prankster, a court jester, an existential joker, a satirist, a parodist who underscored his seriousness with humor, who used words as whoopee cushions, as hand buzzers, to give readers a little jolt as in the first stanza of *Eating Poetry* when he wrote

*Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.
There is no happiness like mine.
I have been eating poetry.*

or when he began his brief essay on *Narrative Poetry* with:

Yesterday at the supermarket, I overheard a man and a woman discussing narrative poetry.

For all his deadpanning, however, he was never far from his recurring themes of absence, negation, vacancy, disintegration, emptiness, hopelessness, and death – all couched in a surreal, Beckettian landscape. Like all serious poets, he revered words, choosing them carefully, using them sparingly to construct clean, simple, straightforward lines that possessed an eerie quality of the inevitable as they moved effortlessly between the commonplace and the sublime, addressing the universal not through the particular but through the universal.

From eNotes:

Critics have called Mark Strand's "The Continuous Life" a perfect poem. Others seem to agree. New York City, for example, thought so highly of the poem they had it inscribed on a park bench in Hudson River Park. "The Continuous Life" originally appeared in The New Yorker and is the title poem of his 1990 poetry collection by the same name.

The Continuous Life

What of the neighborhood homes awash
In a silver light, of children hunched in the bushes,
Watching the grown-ups for signs of surrender,
Signs that the irregular pleasures of moving
From day to day, of being adrift on the swell of duty,
Have run their course? Oh parents, confess
To your little ones the night is a long way off
And your taste for the mundane grows; tell them
Your worship of household chores has barely begun;
Describe the beauty of shovels and rakes, brooms and mops;
Say there will always be cooking and cleaning to do,
That one thing leads to another, which leads to another;
Explain that you live between two great darks, the first
With an ending, the second without one, that the luckiest
Thing is having been born, that you live in a blur
Of hours and days, months and years, and believe
It has meaning, despite the occasional fear
You are slipping away with nothing completed, nothing
To prove you existed. Tell the children to come inside,
That your search goes on for something you lost – a name,
A family album that fell from its own small matter
Into another, a piece of the dark that might have been yours,
You don't really know. Say that each of you tries
To keep busy, learning to lean down close and hear

The careless breathing of earth and feel it's available
Languor come over you, wave after wave, sending
Small tremors of love through your brief,
Undeniable selves, into your days, and beyond.

Excavation #13

A Piece of Nothing

That's all there was to it. No more than a solemn waking to brevity.
- Mark Strand

And then, again, you decide to look at the sketches of domes in cities you've never visited, and probably never will, the domes having insinuated themselves into your reading and into your life. You don't even know the names of the cities and towns but they're pleasant to look at, and spark images of travel. There are moments when the armchair you're sitting in by the window overlooking the park seems to lift off and float above the canals in the cities. You strike up conversations with strangers in languages you don't even know. This could be a wish, or a piece of nothing, connecting you to the world.

Excavation #14

Screen Dump 169

You fill your notebook with admonitions . . .
Not bothering to correct misspellings . . .

Excavation #15

60 years ago in fourth grade I was awestruck by a freckled girl named Patti (with an i). She had the whitest skin in school. 50 years later I began a poem with an image of her, a poem that was selected for inclusion in three anthologies. About 10 years ago my then PA was traveling though Italy with her doctor-husband and found my poem in an anthology on a nightstand in a B&B in Venice.

Mayonnaise Sandwiches

Patty ate tape. She carried around one of those red-and-green Scotch tape dispensers - the metal kind with the serrated edge - and every now and then would pop a piece into her mouth. I attributed her pale skin to that delicacy, and wondered how the tape was able to traverse the miles of intestine we had read about in Scholastic Science, the weekly newsheet Sister Edward made us subscribe to and read from every Thursday afternoon to break up the archaic lab experiments we, or rather she, demonstrated, flanked by Bunsen burners, pipettes, and crotchety nine-volt batteries, in a vain, nationwide knee-jerk to supplant Sputnik; the same Sister Edward, or Stir Edward, the truncation used when, leaning forward in the wood-and-wrought-iron desks bolted in tandem to the floor, we vied for our fifteen minutes of fame as we arced our propped-up hands 130 degrees in front of her great stone face to signify our readiness to regurgitate some trivium if called upon; the same Sister Edward, ornamented

with half a dozen rubber bands on each wrist, who held a marksmanship medal for knuckle accuracy at three yards with a twelve-inch ruler, and who, like Merlin, kept, among other trinkets, a handkerchief up her sleeve. Patty may have been partial to tape, but my pièce de résistance was mayonnaise sandwiches, ideally accompanied on their journey to the center of the torso by a slug of Ovaltine, which, decades before the cyanide-laced Tylenol scare sent American companies scrambling for ingenious devices to outwit disgruntled, axe-grinding, former employees as well as garden-variety sick tickets, used a waxed paper seal that had to be broken to get to the brown crystals, and which, if sent with a fifty-cent piece taped to a square of cardboard to some storefront address in Battlecreek, Michigan, displayed at the end of Captain Midnight's Sunday morning black-and-white half hour, entitled the sender to one plastic decoder ring.

Excavation #16

Riding Toward Death

My friend Mike put together
a packet of information on Raymond Carver
for our poetry group:
color photos of Ray
(with cigarette of course)
chronology
quotes
poems.

Pretty impressive!

I'd seen most of the poems before
and recalled Ray delivering *My Boat* -
a favorite - at one of his last readings:

My boat is being made to order. . . .
It's going to have plenty of room
on it for all my friends. . . .

I'd not seen *Powder Monkey*
about Ray's friend, John Dugan, a carpenter

Driving nails. Drilling and planing lumber.
Joining wood together with other wood. . . .

and how Ray had watched
as one day
John put away his tools
barely taking the time to say goodbye
got into his pickup
tuned to Ricky Skaggs
and drifted over the center line

*riding unharmed, and untouched,
toward death.*

Looking at the poems
brought to mind
how Ray had wrestled his demons

I came out ahead. I didn't lose. . . .

met Tess Gallagher

Tess, of course, I wouldn't go anyplace without her. . . .

lived together for ten years
and got married in Reno
a month and a half before he died:

*And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.*

*And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, and to feel myself
beloved on the earth.*

I had to laugh. Ray had beaten the odds.
His last ten years were, as he said, *gravy*

No other word will do. For that's what it was. Gravy.

Excavation #17

from: An Open Mic at the Saturday Service

(Please Kneel)

Scapegoating!
Yes, scapegoating.
Think of it as a profession -
one of the oldest
akin to masonry
or taxidermy.

Think of Abelard, tonsured and castrated.
Heloise's emails -
love notes thinly disguised as philosophical conundrums.

Ask yourself if it's worth it.

If you fit in
and I'll come back at you
with an Early Bird Special.
An Early-Bird-Gets-The-Worm-Special.
A Blue Light Special.
A Saturday Night Special.
Consider the feeders
and those on the brink.

(Let Us Pray)

Excavation #18

from: My Erotic Other

Act 2 Scene 1 . . . In the red Cobra . . .

She:

My height intimidates some . . .

They love it! . . .

Especially after googling wine lists . . .

As if . . .

Always the same sluggish words . . .

Where are you from? . . .

What do you do? . . . blah blah blah . . .

I traffic in consumables . . .

Packaged as in . . . As You Like It . . .

I hold the aces . . .

Control the scene . . .

Flip the roles . . .

But always . . .

Far from the Madding Crowd . . .

I never anticipate having to count ceiling tiles . . .

I always make the most of a (sometimes) pathetic situation . . .

Ready or not, here I come . . .

Excavation #19

To all ballet moms and ballet dads:

Eating a Footlong in the Car on the Way to Ballet

Her older sister's theatrics following last night's breakup
segue into a sociology final

which later morphs into an episode of Friends on Facebook
with Scott as placeholder until the next real boyfriend.

Corleone the cat cleans out his Buddha Dome
then spends the rest of the afternoon

eyeballing the antics of the neighborhood beneath his window.

The super in the apartment building
sporting bib overalls and snake

attacks the bathroom's drain

worries that his name will be listed among the missing
that his bones will be discovered

five years down the road

in a culvert along Route 169 outside Hibbing, Minnesota.

There are afternoons when the backed-up traffic

on Route 20 West is kaleidoscopic

catapulting drivers into Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone*
with close-ups of Rod and cigarette at Ithaca

lecturing the wide-eyed on scriptwriting's secrets
submitted for their approval.

I am Richie Havens's *High Flyin' Bird*
brushing my teeth before heading the few blocks
to a classroom filled with middle schoolers
whose trips to the pencil sharpener on the window sill
to spot the cars waiting for the only light
is their best shot at escape.

Another substitute and I jack up the rear of a housewife's van
to free it from the stub of a stop sign
it has somehow become impaled on.

Jittery and apologetic she climbs in tugging at her housedress.
Later I pen a note into a permanent record about a kid
whose oblique view of the world 20 years hence
would likely be labeled ADHD
and win him a bag of pharmaceuticals.

I find his scribbles fascinating.

I'm telling my younger daughter
who's devouring a footlong in the car on the way to ballet
about Woodstock
and how Richie would bar chords
with what appeared to be a lemur's thumb
reminding me of Uma in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*
her long lean legs only partially hidden by a short denim skirt.
Adjusting her iPod, she asks whether it's true
that everyone there was stoned.

Excavation #20

For my headstone if I change my mind and choose to be buried instead of
cremated:

The Dogs in the Trees

The dogs are in the trees again
and they're barking
waving to their friends
refusing to come down
scratching shedding ordering Chinese
hounding me
to do this and that.



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